

Humans instinctively use categories to make sense of the world around us. Our natural ability to sort objects and experiences quickly is essential to our survival. We respond differently to sirens or snakes or the smell of smoke than we do to purring or puppies the smell of fresh-baked bread. We create what amount to mental shortcuts.

The creativity of the human mind is one of God's truly astonishing gifts. But we have to stay aware, because evil works as a parasite on the good things that God creates. When we let our mental shortcuts become habitual, evil can set down a root. When we allow ourselves to rely on categories of *people*, our natural ability can lead to mischief.

The categories that our minds create can shift into stereotypes of people. And that is how we feed the roots of an evil that starts slowly and quietly. At first, we start seeing only the surfaces of people. Gradually, our worlds begin to flatten. When we allow helpful categories to harden into stereotypes, we isolate ourselves from each other. Evil begins to thrive.

Now, some stereotypes are negative and some are positive, but they are all focused on surfaces—they involve what we perceive of people's exterior and ignore what is going on inside them. And the more we look only at surfaces, whether positive or negative, the less we experience actual human beings. In time, Arabs are terrorists. Asians are good at math. Black men are threats. Jews are good with money. Do you see what I mean? Cops are racist. Mothers are nurturing. Christians are judgmental. Buddhists are pacifists.

Tax collectors and sinners are enemies of God.

Well, *some* are, but some are not. In some cases, perhaps, even *most* are not. I hope that something like that thought crossed your mind as I listed those superficial stereotypes. If so, you have caught something that Jesus saw in the scribes and Pharisees grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus routinely befriended. Jesus offered these two parables to these particular Pharisees and scribes because these righteous men had become lost.

Their grumbling seems to be focused on a pair of categories—those who are sinners and those who are righteous. Jesus dissolves these categories with a stunning set of parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

In these two parables, Luke's Jesus presents two people who behave in unexpected and questionable ways.

But to really see why these parables are *truly* odd, you need to know a little more about why the righteous Pharisees are upset. You see, when Luke refers to the "righteous," he simply means those folks who are doing their best to live up to the law. They are grumbling because Jesus actually eats with sinners and tax collectors—people who, from the Pharisees' perspective, inhabit a highly undesirable category.

When Luke talks about "sinners," he means people whose behavior is so consistently appalling that the entire community is aware of it—people who seem to be not even really trying to behave or people who had jobs forbidden by Jewish law—a category that, ironically, includes sheep-herding. Tax collectors were, of course, acting agents of the Roman Empire. For Jesus to share a table with these folks is to demonstrate an intentional solidarity with people that decent society has categorized as problematic outsiders.

That's the context surrounding the two parables that Jesus offers.

"Which of you," Jesus says to the righteous and grumbling men, "Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" Now, to catch how odd this would have been to the Pharisees, I need to update the question.

Today, Jesus might have said something like this: "Imagine being a banker responsible for the sole income of five or six families who had pooled \$100,000. Now imagine that you lost \$1,000. Which of you would not leave the rest of the money unwatched and exposed in an environment filled with thieves to go search for the \$1,000 until it was found? And then once you found it, which of you wouldn't you celebrate, bring it back and then call all your friends together to celebrate a second time?"

"Or what woman," Jesus goes on, "having lost a tenth of her treasure, would not work all night to find it only to spend it all on a celebration with her neighbors as soon as she found it?" Who doesn't behave like this?

Well, I don't for one. I daresay that none of us would. But God would. God does. God does behave like this.

Jesus transcends the Pharisee's categories by using a shepherd and a woman to evoke images of God who not only actively seeks the lost, but rejoices when they are found. Only God can seek the one—the one sheep or

the one coin—without putting the others at risk. And when God does find a lost one, without waiting for apologies or promises or changes in behavior, God simply rejoices!

These are parables about finding, not forgiveness. These are parables about God actively seeking restoration and rejoicing, not about people who change sinful behavior into righteous behavior. Maybe these are not even really stories about being lost and found. Maybe these are stories about God being so ridiculously in love with all of God's children that God and all of heaven breaks into wild rejoicing whenever we turn our faces to God.

And that's really all it means to repent: to turn our faces to God. For some of us, repentance may include changing our patterns of behavior. For some, repentance may involve some contrition or remorse. But at the heart of the matter, repentance is a change in perspective, a shift in how we perceive and respond to life. As an act of turning toward God, repentance is the behavior of people who realize that they have been lost and who trust that God will find them. The outcome of repentance is a transformation of our habitual patterns of perceiving and responding to God, to the life we have been granted and to other people—other children of God.

People who become aware of their own destructive behavior are often in a better position to repent because they can see that they are lost. That can often also make them more open to God's transforming presence. Oddly enough, as the Pharisees and scribes illustrate, repentance may actually come harder for righteous people. People doing their best to live up to the teachings of the church, who give of their time and their resources, and who come to church regularly. These are all good and worthwhile behaviors. But they are still *behaviors* and behaviors—especially *good* behaviors—can satisfy our instinct to categorize. But if we are not constantly turning toward God, we can come to think that we don't need to. There's no desire for God to find us because we don't experience ourselves as lost.

There are any number of ways for good practicing Christians to become lost. I have met parents so invested in their children's success that they dedicate every waking hour to soccer games, dance recitals, cello lessons and math tutors. Some of these *good people* have lost the plot. I know men and women so focused on making money to avoid the poverty that they grew up with that they work relentlessly, day and night, at jobs that don't bring out their deepest gifts. Some of them are lost.

I know young men and women who will do anything to be accepted by their peers. Retirees who have worked hard all their lives, who now find themselves adrift with only fragments of purpose. Well-meaning Christians who seem to be constantly badgering people to accept Jesus as their Lord and savior. Many of these good and righteous Christians are lost.

And isn't it ironic that the righteous so often get lost by searching for God?

Because, in the end, what we *do*, how we *behave*, is secondary. Who we *are* is primary. Who we *all* are comes first. Who we *all are* is children of God. We are *not* the shepherd combing the hills of Judea, we are the sheep that stray. *God* is the shepherd who seeks and always finds, and then rejoices. We are *not* the woman who lights a lamp and sweeps through the night, we are the coin, her treasure. *God* is the woman who works relentlessly until she can reunite us with the other children of God. And then she throws a lavish celebration.

Life is full with God's rejoicing. You can watch for it and turn your face toward it. Listen for a baby's laugh. Watch a hawk fly. Find a perfectly ripe tangerine and eat it with no distractions. Hold the hand of a dear friend. Stand by a pine tree in the pouring rain. Creation *is* God rejoicing. Rejoicing at having found another of her lost ones; rejoicing that she is that much closer to reuniting all her children. Even you and me.

We come to this church, sinners and righteous alike, to turn our faces once again to God, trusting that we can bring any and all of our lostness to God. At this table, we participate in the rejoicing of the shepherd who risks everything to seek us out; rejoicing with the woman who lights a lamp, and who will sweep and sweep and sweep until every one of us and all of us—until we are all together — made whole in God's mercy, grace and love.

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